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From the Chicago Tribune

Support urged for Arab-Americans

WW II camps still haunt memories

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LOS ANGELES -- Amid reports of hate crimes, assaults and even killings of innocent people with Arab names, Japanese-Americans are taking the lead in efforts to support Arab-Americans even as they recall World War II, when their fellow Americans vilified them for Japan's actions.

A Japanese-American congressman spearheaded attempts to get NFL officials to read a statement at games this weekend denouncing violence against Arab-Americans. In a gesture of unity, Japanese-American veterans in Washington this week hosted Arab-Americans at their war memorial at the Capitol. The Asian American Journalists Association has issued a plea for the media to cover the Arab-American community fairly.

'Sulu' on board

Other Japanese-Americans have been sharing their stories at schools, unity marches and on the Internet in the hopes of preventing a repeat of the past.

"As a Japanese-American, I am deeply troubled by the lunatic fringe of Americans shooting at Arab-Americans. We're seeing a chilling echo of what happened 60 years ago," said George Takei, 65, the actor best-known for his role as Lt. Sulu in the original "Star Trek" television series.

Takei, one of 120,000 Japanese-Americans forced into internment camps during World War II, has expressed his outrage about the violence against Arab-Americans on his Web site for his "Star Trek" fans.

"After the Oklahoma City bombing, did we go around killing white American males?" Takei added. "The fanatics [attacking Arabs] are no better than the terrorists."

Denouncing hate crimes

Since the Sept. 11 attacks in New York and Washington, hundreds of hate crimes and harassment incidents have been reported against Arab-Americans.

Japanese-Americans say they are heartened by the denouncement of such incidents by President Bush and Atty. Gen. John Ashcroft, in contrast with U.S. policies during World War II when most Japanese-Americans were placed in internment camps.

Some are concerned about recent arrests of 75 Arab nationals for questioning in the terrorist attacks and attempts by the Bush administration to indefinitely detain Arab residents of the United States who either were suspected of

committing crimes here or who entered the country legally but overstayed their visas' limits.

"Everyone understands the need to tighten security, but there is a problem when you cross the line and begin to abuse people's rights. This is one of the things we need to be vigilant about," said William Yoshino, director of the Japanese American Citizens League Midwest region based in Chicago.

"Japanese-Americans were confined behind barbed wire," Yoshino said. "Today, Arab-Americans are not in a literal confinement, but they are a community under siege."

Officials in Arab-American organizations say they are gratified by the support from Japanese-Americans.

"There is a strong sense of solidarity," said Ziad Asali, president of the Washington-based American Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee.

Asali, who attended the event at the Japanese-American war memorial, added: "I was struck by the number of [Japanese-Americans] who were motivated to offer help and support. . . . They want to ensure that America learns from the dark chapter that they went through."

U.S. Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.), who was sent to a camp as a child, spearheaded an effort to get the NFL to read a statement this weekend denouncing the attacks on Arab-Americans.

Backlash a hot issue

The backlash against Arab-Americans has been a hot issue in the Japanese-American press. The Rafu Shimpo, a nationally distributed Japanese-American newspaper, has written extensively about the topic in its news section, editorials and columns.

"Japanese-Americans are keeping a close eye on the situation," said Gavin Kelley, acting editor. "Based on the letters and e-mail we're getting, the attacks don't sit well with our readers."

Reports of harassment of Arab-Americans are particularly painful for older Japanese-Americans who were forced into camps after World War II began.

Bruce Kaji, a 75-year-old business consultant and real estate broker in Los Angeles who helped found the Japanese-American National Museum in Los Angeles, was 15 when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. He went from being an accepted part of his community--which included Jews, Hispanics, Russians, Armenians and Japanese--to being an outsider.

"I had a newspaper route with another Japanese guy and [after Pearl Harbor] my distributor called us and said we couldn't work anymore for him," Kaji said. "We said why and he said because we were Japanese. That was the first time I felt different."

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